

Hughes (654.)

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A Short Case Record in Psychiatry— With a Moral.

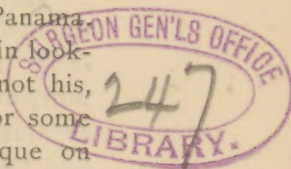
A MORBIDLY SENSITIVE MORAL SENSE.

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MRS. M. E. W., of Ill., aged twenty-six; married; one child. One evening in May, 1877, she worked late at night to finish a carpet, retiring after twelve o'clock. Soon after she got in bed it appeared to her that she had broken the sabbath, and must therefore destroy the carpet. She spent a considerable time in devotional exercises. She thought it was her duty to pray for each member of the family separately, and all the relatives and friends the same way. Since then her husband has known her to often be as late as two o'clock at night, before she would get to bed, in consequence of these devotions.

In January, 1879, while some relatives were here visiting, from Indiana, one of the boys showed a collection of coins and other things, among them a piece of a coffin that he had picked up while crossing the Isthmus of Panama. She was soon impressed that she had done wrong in looking at it; that he had taken something that was not his, and that she ought not to have touched it. For some time after that she did not want to wear her sacque on that account, and would keep working her fingers as though she was rubbing something off them.

"In 1879, while her mother was helping to wash the dishes, there was a plate setting in the cupboard that had had some beefsteak on it, and when it was taken off, some blood was on the plate. Mother washed this plate in the pan with the rest of the things. Then an idea came to her that it was wrong to use blood, and that she had used it. She thought afterward she should



have told mother to rinse the plate off before putting it in the dishwater. She thought this blood got on some of the milk vessels and set into them (as she said), and would only come out of them when used." She still holds this last delusion.

To her husband she seems too precise in distinguishing between right and wrong—morbidly sensitive in regard to wrong; theorizes too much about the right and wrong, and does not look at it practically. He says (which was a good conclusion), as all the doctors he consulted advised him to move away a while or altogether, he went from his farm to a neighboring town, and engaged, in two establishments, in the lumber business, conducting one place himself, forming a silent partnership with another, and he and his wife mutually arranged a scale of prices. This she regarded as practising deception on the public, and it gave her great mental distress.

The sum of her mental condition is one of morbid activity of the moral and religious feelings. She finds no way of extenuating any of her fancied sins.

She has had several miscarriages. Her child is a suckling babe; her appetite is poor; her skin sallow, liver torpid, and general appearance anæmic and neurasthenic.

Her husband was advised to see that the babe was weaned; that she be put upon reconstructive and tranquilizing nerve tonics, beef peptones and other similar nutrients, including cod-liver oil and iron; that she be separated, so soon as practicable, from babe and husband and all present surroundings, and placed among remote and congenial relatives in an invigorating climate, with injunction to friends not to introduce the subject upon which she is morbid, or take her to church, or allow her to read the Bible.

A private home for the insane and nervous would be preferable to the plan advised, but the latter accorded more with her wishes and her husband's desires, and was advised, as a temporary expedient, with the injunction to secure a distant hospital home for her in case mental

recovery did not reappear with the return of her physical vigor! The moral effect of a residence in a hospital would benefit her any way.

This is one of the kind of cases a crowded public State hospital would not receive, because of its chronicity and apparent harmlessness. She ought to have been placed in a hospital for the insane several years ago, while the disease was recent. There is a possibility, but not a strong probability, of her recovery; but she should bear no more children.

She needs also to be watched, lest a suicidal inclination should develop, and lest the disposition already manifested to destroy the carpet because it was the cause of her offending, might become transformed into an impulse to self-mutilation or destruction.

Prolonged absence from her husband and babe may give her over-taxed procreative and maternal functions the rest they need, and thus benefit her, while entire change of surroundings might, by new impressions, excite dormant ideational centers into agreeable action, and give the painfully and morbidly over-active portions the needed quiescence.

The moral of this case is that she might have been saved if sent to the asylum for the insane, or to a private home for such persons, in the beginning of her malady, in 1877, or otherwise skillfully managed by a practical alienist. These are the cases in which delay in the beginning is most common and most dangerous.

